

# Connecting Ministry with the Corporate World

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David A. Krueger is executive director of the Center for Ethics and Corporate Policy in Chicago. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, May 30-June 6, 1990, pps. 572-574. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org). Article prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

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For some people religious life and business practice are integrally related in a creative tension. For others-both clergy and business professionals-the worlds of church and corporate life are galaxies apart, separated by ignorance, hostility, apathy, language, interests, values. But to profess Christ and participate in the Christian community requires us to affirm a connection between faith and economic life. The faith of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures is that God is ruler of all creation and all realms of human life-economic, political, cultural and personal. To assert otherwise is to suggest that the God of the Scriptures is but a god among gods with competing spheres of sovereignty.

To profess Christ as Lord of all is to suggest that God's kingdom penetrates all of life and that the moral demands of discipleship-love, justice, faithfulness-reach into every system and institutional arrangement. To affirm such a universalism of faith requires us to denounce dichotomies like "sacred and secular," which can provide conceptual crutches for the artificial compartmentalization of faith and various spheres of life. Whatever our occupation, each of us is called to a vocation of service to neighbour and community, be we priest or hangman, as Luther said. The U.S. Catholic bishops affirm the connection eloquently in *Economic Justice for All* when they write, "To worship and pray to the God of the universe is to acknowledge that the healing love of God extends to all persons and to every part of existence, including work, leisure, money, economic and political power and their use, and to all those practical policies that either lead to justice or impede it."

Neither church nor business is monolithic. The pluralism of theologies and ecclesiologies makes it difficult to generalize about ministry. The multifaceted texture of American corporate life and practice and the enormous diversity of people's experiences within business make it difficult also to generalize about ministry to the business world. Our different foundational notions of God and church as well as our various empirical impressions of the corporate world inform our models of ministry to business.

When the primary posture of the church's ministry to the corporate world is a critical, prophetic one of denouncing corporations for their alleged ills and failings, business can seem utterly godless. The other extreme is an uncritical accommodation to corporate culture, assuming its practices are fully consistent with God's intentions for the world. Business becomes a god.

Both attitudes are theologically and descriptively unsatisfactory. As we are both saints and sinners, so our social institutions embody both good and evil-at the same time. Somewhere in between these two extreme approaches lies a proper connection between the church and the world of business, a relationship of critical, healthy, lively tension that is both prophetic and supportive, critical and constructive, challenging and affirming. Such ministry embraces both the radical transformative demands of love and the prudent recognition of the permanence of sin in the human heart and in the structures of society.

At the Centre for Ethics and Corporate Policy we have sponsored an annual clergy education project that attempts to enhance clergy sensitivity to economic and workplace realities. For part of the program, clergy spend a day in the workplaces of one or two congregants. This permits clergy to see how faith might connect to work in practical ways and also to gain insight into the ethical dilemmas inherent in corporate life. In all cases, the executives claim that this is the first time their clergy have visited them at work. In most cases, clergy say this is the first time they have set foot in their congregants' workplaces. In all cases, clergy say the experience heightens their own understanding of the realities laity face as they attempt to be Christians in the corporate world.

We try to operate with certain principles about the nature of ministry to the corporate world. First, one should engage in such ministry with humility and open-mindedness. While Scripture and the Christian tradition have much to say about discipleship, they provide neither a blueprint for the rapidly changing, increasingly global economic order nor easy answers to the myriad of ethical issues in modern corporate practice: work force reductions, plant closings and corporate restructuring, corporate governance, the role of women and minorities within organizations, concern for sustainable ecosystems, relationships with local communities, business-government relations and the reality of multinational businesses. Scriptural norms, principles and visions of life are often articulated in highly poetic, paradigmatic, allegorical, even

cryptic language that does not lend itself to easy application. Scripture articulates general norms of love, justice and community, often conveyed in concrete narrative illustrations, but rarely provides the systemic and institutional strategies and tactics to accomplish those ends in a complicated technological age.

Second, one should engage in ministry with businesspeople as a listener and mutual learner. Church professionals have much to learn from laity in the corporate world who profess allegiance to both the church and the corporation. Countless people in the private sector struggle every day to relate faith to work and to embody within their occupations a larger sense of religious vocation and calling. Often, though, they feel that their concerns and experiences are not primary to the agendas of their congregations. Likewise, the laity have much to learn from church professionals-both clergy and educators. Clergy can increase effective lay ministry in the workplace by nurturing members of congregations in the basic fundamentals of the faith-literacy in Scripture and Christian traditions and participation in liturgy and the rhythms of the church year. Seminaries can function as creative centres for the continuing education of the laity in the workplace.

Listening and mutual learning are essential given the partial nature of knowledge and experience. We know less than the full truth; we see less than the whole of reality. When people generalize from their own partial experience and vision of the world, they run the risk of falsely characterizing the whole-an easy pitfall when reflecting on the religious and moral character of business. It is easy, for instance, to generalize from a particular corporate takeover and conclude that all mergers and acquisitions are bad. Anecdotal evidence is usually insufficient for moral conclusions.

Rarely are there sustained opportunities within communities of faith to reflect upon the ethical dimensions of work in light of faith. Congregations must become, to use James Gustafson's expression, "communities of moral discourse" where congregants debate in a spirit of civility and openness social issues of the day in light of their faith. Faith communities and religious traditions, by themselves, cannot provide answers to all moral questions of modern corporate life. But they can become seedbeds of creative thought and action for church members who desire to embody the vision and norms of faith in the policies and practices of their corporations.

Third, the church must seek links between its language and values and those of the corporate world. The language of faith-prophetic, narrative, symbolic, allegorical, unconditional- often stands in contrast to the language of business-strategic, operational, quantitative, measurable, conditional. Churches must work to find common words and values that permit more explicit connections between faith and work, thereby giving clarity and substance to the ministry of participants and shapers within business organizations. The corporate trend toward articulating mission, corporate values and ethics statements, as well as attending to corporate culture and

external constituencies, points to areas laden with notions of purpose, value, obligation and community-notions inherent in faith communities. Similarities and distinctions can be probed between the economic value of efficiency and the religious value of stewardship. The corporate push for quality, excellence and customer satisfaction can have religious dimensions-analogues to service and servanthood. Demographic trends are forcing employers to take greater account of growing numbers of women and minorities in the workplace in such areas as recruitment, career development, employee benefits and family policy.

Fourth, faith communities must be discerning and strategic about the use of prophetic, pastoral and other expressions of ministry. Ideally, a prophetic ministry allows people to recognize sin and calls them to the ideals of the kingdom-justice in the workplace, the diminishing of racism and sexism, and the support and building up of people. But clergy must engage in a more tenuous and ambiguous constructive task as well. Critical denunciations of systemic and institutional practices can prompt recognition of social and personal sin and unmet human needs. But they can also function narcissistically and irresponsibly, unnecessarily alienating others and avoiding the more difficult, messy task of reform and transformation. Prophetic denunciation is often of little moral assistance to the manager seeking to discern what is morally possible within the bounds of circumstances, resources and competing claims. It is not helpful, for instance, for the manager to hear the preacher offer wholesale denunciation of workforce reductions and plant closings as a symptom of corporate greed and the triumph of profits over people. Causal factors are rarely so simplistic.

It is more helpful, and more difficult, to ask how biblically informed norms might be sustained and embodied in a rapidly changing global economy. Decisions within the corporate world are shaped not merely by ethical ideals but also by economic, social, political and legal constraints. Christian ethics, for most people, becomes the art of discerning the morally "more or less," the less than perfect "better or worse," in the myriad of trade-offs among competing values and interests. As the reform movements sweeping through Eastern Europe are learning, denunciation of evil and corruption is a necessary first step toward social change, but constructing new institutional arrangements is by far the more arduous task.

Fifth, the church's efforts at ministry with the corporate world must begin with self-reflection and evaluation. Churches are themselves corporations. As the U.S. Catholic bishops acknowledge, churches must judge themselves by moral standards that are at least as rigorous as those to which they would hold other corporations accountable. As churches model their own convictions and norms in their institutional policies and practices, their capacity to influence the corporate world will strengthen. Does it matter that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America asks its Board of Pensions to divest itself of all securities of companies doing business in South Africa

but at the same time signs a multimillion-dollar contract to purchase IBM computers for its entire headquarters? How rigorous and pure must the church be?

Finally, churches must let the very categories and frameworks by which they construct ministry to the corporate world adapt to the larger political and economic trends that are revolutionizing the globe. In past decades, larger debates about the merits of capitalist and socialist systems coloured visions of ministry. As the ills of capitalism became apparent in the late 19th century and as various forms of socialism -- Soviet, democratic, Chinese-developed in the 20th century, notable Christian theologians -- Tillich, the early Reinhold Niebuhr, the early Brunner and, more recently, liberation theologians-have advocated the wedding of Christian ethics with socialist economic practice. With such an intellectual heritage within the church, it is no wonder that helping to formulate business ethics policies and ministry to the corporate world has been low on the agendas of many churches and church professionals. But if recent events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are any indication, single-party politics joined with centrally controlled economies are no longer viable experiments in political economy. Capitalism, consisting of heavy doses of free markets and private capital, coupled with a pluralistic democratic political order, may be the only game in town for creating wealth in ways that satisfy the masses. If this trend is indeed the case, the need for the church's ministry to the corporate world is only magnified.

Theologians throughout Christian history have envisioned the church as a community of believers not separate from the ambiguities of a sinful yet graced world but fully immersed in that world. That vision is also one for Christians in a corporate world that will be called upon to make even greater contributions to the well-being of peoples across the globe. The church must be a critical and constructive partner.